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DEPT FOR SCA/PB, DRL
PLEASE PASS TO SECRETARY RICE, DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE,
U/S BURNS, U/S HUGHES, U/S DOBRIANSKY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [PK](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR TAHIR-KHELI'S ISLAMABAD VISIT

11. (SBU) Summary. Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State for Women's Empowerment Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli met with a wide spectrum of government officials, civil society, and media -- and garnered significant media coverage -- during her March 14-19 visit to Islamabad. Her interlocutors presented a range of opinions on the state of women's empowerment in Pakistan, the government's recent passage of the "Women's Protection Bill", and what else needs to be done. End summary.

An Array of Interlocutors

12. (SBU) During her five-day tour d'horizon of women's empowerment issues in Islamabad, Ambassador Tahir-Kheli's packed schedule included meetings with:

- President Pervez Musharraf
- Mrs. Sebha Musharraf
- Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz
- Senate Chairman Mohammedmian Somroo and two women Senators
- Minister of Women's and Youth Affairs Sumaira Malik and her staff
- Foreign Secretary Riaz Khan
- Mutahidda Majlis-e Amal's senior women parliamentarians Samia Raheel Qazi, Balqis Saif, and Kaiser Firdous
- Secular opposition parliamentarians: Tehmina Daultana (PML-N), Fauzia Wahab (PPP), Rukhsana Zuberi (PPP), and Barrister Sadia Abbasi (PML-N)
- More than 60 civil society leaders (NGOs who assist women, women's rights activists, and media)
- The students and faculty of Fatima Jinnah Women's University (where Ambassador Tahir-Kheli gave a talk)
- Students, parents, and community leaders of two schools

GOP Bullish On Pakistan's Progress in Women's Empowerment

13. (SBU) Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and Minister of Women's and Youth Affairs Sumaira Malik gave Ambassador Tahir-Kheli optimistic readouts on the government's "significant progress" on the issue of women's empowerment, saying that the government had made women's empowerment a major priority. Beginning with a quote from the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who said "if women are not given a place side-by-side with men, there will be no progress" both Aziz and Malik -- in separate meetings -- proudly touted Pakistan's recent achievements:

-- One of the highest numbers of women participating in the political process (33% in the provincial and national assemblies, 33% in local government), Malik suggested that Pakistan could be a role model to Afghan women in this area;

-- A recent doubling of the quota for women in government jobs to 10% from the current 5%;

-- Graduating the first batch of women Air Force Officers;

-- Graduating the first batch of women Army officers;

-- Amending laws to allow women to have flexibility to work in the evening; and

-- Passing a progressive "Women's Protection Bill."

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14. (SBU) Describing the Women's Protection Bill as the "first time Pakistani women feel a sense of protection and that the government is doing something for them," Malik said getting the bill passed was a difficult task. She described this process as a balancing act between placating liberal elements who said the bill didn't go far enough and Islamist elements who said the bill was un-Islamic. When asked about implementation of the bill and how the Government of Pakistan had planned to advertise to women that the law had been passed, Malik and Prime Minister Aziz both said they had gone on speaking tours to inform Pakistani women of their rights, and that they would launch a public relations campaign using television, radio and other media sources. Malik also said the government had started a training module at the "Women's Political School" -- a training program for female local government leaders -- with the hope that councilors who understood the new law and their legal rights would then spread the word to their constituents. Once women know about the law, the next challenge will be implementing the bill, because it requires changing procedures, getting forensic evidence properly collected and admitted, and changing mindsets of judges and families.

Civil Society's Pragmatic Concerns

15. (SBU) In discussions with a range of civil society personalities -- from women who run crisis shelters and vocational training programs to female lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists -- women acknowledged the increasing role of women in Pakistani society, particularly in the realm of political participation, but also expressed sincere concerns about the state of women in Pakistan. Many were concerned by what they see as an increase in crimes against women, which often feature prominently in national newspapers. When asked about legal protections for women, most said they were glad the government had passed last year's domestic violence bill and this year's women's protection bill, but were concerned that they were not being

implemented. As Shehnaz Bokhari, who runs a crisis center for the victims of domestic violence, put it, "these bills are a good start, but the institutions needed to carry a case through to justice don't work." Others told Ambassador Tahir-Kheli that one element of the new "Women's Protection Bill" -- which changes the procedures for how a rape victim would file a case, moving it from her local police station to the regional courthouse -- will actually make it more difficult for a woman to get justice because courthouses are located further away than local police stations. (Note: The government argues that it changed procedures to mitigate routine complaints that police officers further abuse rape victims at the police station and take bribes from the perpetrator not to file the report. They argue that shifting cases to regional courthouses improves the process and adds a layer of accountability, because more senior, better educated personnel will handle the cases. End note).

View from the MMA: Some Common Ground

¶6. (SBU) Three senior leaders of key Islamist political party Jamaat-i Islami's (JI) Women's Wing -- Samia Raheel Qazi (JI leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed's daughter and leader of the JI Women's Wing), Balqis Saif (a teacher from Balochistan), and Kaiser Firdous (a former Pakistani Air Force Medical Corps

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officer) -- discussed the Islamist coalition's perspective on women's empowerment in Pakistan. Qazi, the most outspoken of the three, began the meeting by emphasizing that Pakistan's Islamist parties are "very focused on the problems of women...we're not against things that help women." She went on to explain that Pakistan's Islamist coalition, the Mutahidha Majlis-e Ammal (MMA), which includes JI, does not support the government's efforts because it is "focusing on the wrong issues...we want to tackle the correct issues." In the MMA's eyes, the Women's Protection bill is unislamic because it sought to tone down the hudood ordinances; Qazi, Saif, and Firdous said the bill they wanted to see was one that helps women get access to justice. MMA members also pointed to an alleged recent increase in violence against women, which they claimed was evidence that the bill had taken things in the wrong direction. Qazi said that she had written her own bill -- one that would have helped women in prisons get legal and medical aid, trained police and judges to handle hudood cases, and trained people to handle forensic evidence -- but lamented that the government had only taken the title, "the Women's Protection Bill." They also said that the government needed to tackle what they believe are the "real" concerns for women in Pakistan: clean drinking water, safe and good education for girls in Pakistan, and health care (especially reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, kidney disorders, diabetes, TB, and malaria). (Comment: These three very articulate, well-educated women dispel the pervasive belief that the religious coalition they belong to is "unenlightened," "anti-women", and retrogressive. The concerns they raised about the Women's Protection Bill and access to justice for women echo those from the most liberal women's activists and demonstrates that there may be room for dialogue and joint action between women across the divides of religion and ideology. End comment.)

¶7. (U) This cable has been cleared by Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli.

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